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WILD HERON





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POEMS BY

DANIEL WHITEHEAD HICKY



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WILD HERON

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II-O

FIRST EDITION

I-P

To
a very certain person



For permission to reprint many of these poems the author's thanks are due the editors of the following magazines and periodicals:

Harper's Magazine
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WILD HERON



Wild Heron

LIGHTLY now, as lightly as
A breath of wind breathes through the grass,
Softly, softly, quieter
Than an opening lily's stir,
The heron, wings of folded white,
Treads the silence of the night.

Through the waters of the dark
Flashing with a firefly's spark,
By the fern-banks sweet and close,
Palely as a dream he goes,
Spreads his young wings frail and thin
To let the starlight drift within,
Folds them slowly back again,
Cool with starlight as with rain.

Softly, softly, through the night
He wanders, white as snow is white,
And when the last marsh shadows pass
To let the sunrise light the grass,
Dawn will find him, quietly,
The secret blossom on a tree.

Song for Our Time

THIS is a song of all the world's lost things:
Of love beneath the lilacs, greening springs
Grown loud with sparrows drinking dawn's delight,
And dew-wet roses at the edge of night.

Of English countrysides so still with peace
A harebell stirs them in the wind's embrace,
Of skies by cloud and lark inhabited,
Dusk falling quieter than a word unsaid.

Of cities slumbering from the dark till dawn,
Their thousand years a pillow to dream upon;
Proud Paris pale with blossoming chestnut trees,
Vienna bright with stars and melodies.

These are the things that were, and are no more.
Let us pause now, think back on them before
A regimented step, a bayonet's dart,
Cleaves even beauty's memory from the heart.

Fog Off Brunswick Sound

LIKE a great seagull lost and flying blind
Fog rides the lower reaches of the sky,
Spreading grey fluttering wings upon the wind,
Dipping into the sea beyond the cry
Of shrimp-boats and their masters' hoarsening horn,
Flapping against the brows of fishermen staring
Shoreward with pale, salt-weary eyes that burn,
Seeing against the east no promise of clearing.
Blow out, O foghorn, blow! Your plaintive blast
Is not the voice of sea and fog alone—
It is the throat, the cry of all men lost
Deep in the cities' canyons of steel and stone,
On starless deserts or the mountains' height,
Crying forever for a hand, a light.

Island Moonrise

SCENTED with oleanders' breath
The hesitant darkness falls
Along the leaves still warm with sun.
At slow white intervals

The gulls go by, their sharpened cries
Dividing sky and land,
Then all is darkly one again:
The sky, the tide, the sand.

Only the drowsy grasses stir
Till bright, and suddenly,
Like a lone bather now, the moon
Slips in the quiet sea.

Westwall and Maginot

[January, 1940]

AGAIN THE ROAD

AGAIN the selfsame road their feet have trod!
Remembered villages and trees grown back,
New bridges now, new helmets for their head,
Familiar meadows for the first attack!
How easily they slip from days of peace
To war again, as one might change a suit;
Or was it peace, or but an armistice?—
The same dark enemy, the bitter fruit . . .
Down, down, into the bowels of the earth
They go to man dark instruments that whirl
A generation south, or east, or north,
Unleash a tide of gases that will curl
In driven waves, a sea of death controlled
As casually as a cigarette is rolled.

THE YOUNG

The young have answered, the laughing, with touseled hair
Yellow as wheatfields withering in the sun,
Whose eager voices ride the tremulous air,
The unafraid whose faith is strong as stone.
Their kisses are unspent beneath the lilacs,
Their loins are yet to know the tender, young

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Frauleins and mademoiselles. Within the barracks
They dream of passion like a song unsung.
Playing at cards until the guns are calling,
At chess until slow darkness wins the game,
They yawn and search the sky for new stars falling,
Forests of midnight for a thread of flame.
These are the young whose eyes like embers glow
Beyond the Westwall and the Maginot.

THE DEAD

The guns' slow thunder dies with darkening day.
The hilltop runs with blood, grows musical
With failing breath and words the dying say
To names unknown. Their faltering fingers trail
The smoking earth for sustenance as might
A child reach for a warm, familiar breast;
Withdrawing, stiffened now beneath the night,
Close fast upon their futile pinch of dust.
They are the dead, the seed of centuries
Turned under by the sharpened spade of war;
Above them now the blackened vulture flies,
Maggots drink at the river of each scar.
Blow out, ye bugles, far and high and shrill!
Victorious, the dead have taken this hill!

ONLY THE LIVING

O not the dead left on the fields of battle,
The dying with last daylight in their eye,
Can know again the taste of death, its rattle
Like gunfire down a red, astonished sky.
Only the living who return at last
Limping upon the arm of Time, can know
The death that is forever, that will blast
Beauty from April's blossom, winter's snow.
They must sit out and sun their years away
Staring at shattered feet that raced the wind,
At shrunken arms that held the world one day,
Hearing the choking throat, the broken mind,
Cursing their God, the fumbling shell that gave
Their youth this long slow conference with the grave.

The Ivory Tower

SO LONG my heart has sickened of the noise
Of cities when they lie awake, or sleep,
Men chattering like sparrows in self-praise,
Recounting all the worldly goods they reap,
I shall go back and seek the ivory tower,
The door I have forsaken, find the key,
And light the logs again and watch the hour
Drift like a leaf relinquished quietly.
I shall be then not lonely as I am
Treading the busy streets half-mad, half-blind,
Among all men yet strangely set apart.
I shall relearn all I have lost to them,
Searching the secret jungles of the heart,
The pale moon-drenched himalayas of the mind.

Boy in Spring

THIS is the tremulous time of year
A boy will pause and suddenly stare
Into the fire a flower makes,
Tracing the dark, the lighter streaks,
Within his quick hands, bit by bit,
Or in his mind, unraveling it.
And he will throw his book aside,
Faun that he is, and leap and hide
Where maple branches open wide
To let him ambush in their cove
Of cool green leaves, green skies above,
And be the first, or almost so,
To watch the birds come back, to know
Upon what bough, beneath what leaf
They build their little house of grief.
And he will lie upon the grass
For hours to watch a lizard pass,
Or catch a firefly, almost shout
To see its yellow light go out.

Spring is the only time a boy
Can let his heart overrun with joy.
Autumn is not for him, the cold
November days of drifted gold,
Nor winter coming fast upon
The birches turning red to brown.
The year is going then, is gone,

Darkness without, and dark within.
A boy must be where things begin,
His ears attuned, sharp as a knife,
Pressed close upon the heart of life.

Escape

I SAID I would forget you: I would journey
 Into the farthest reaches of the earth,
In steaming jungles or the high sierras,
 Forget you through long nights of wine and mirth.

But every sound that followed me to exile—
 The music of the trees strange forests made,
The breathless silence of the frozen twilights,
 Were songs you sang, were words you never said.

And when I lift a wine-glass I am lifting
 Your lips to mine, your bright eyes shining clear,
And crashing it upon the floor beneath me,
 Once more it is my heart I shatter there!

War Has Its Day

WAR has its day. Each generation knows
The stricken field, the city sacked by fire,
Its crawling refugees, the child that goes
With cannon-lighted eyes from pyre to pyre,
Cathedrals packed with worshipers too late
To summon God above the battles' thunder;
No sea, but in due time, has borne the weight
Of blood upon its waters, men sucked under.
So it has always been. But, warring done,
Child that he is, man will return at last
Shame-faced and prodigal, and once again
As though at some new wonder from the East,
Bewildered, stare upon a sparrow's wing,
A snowdrop pressing at the heart of spring.

Noon in the Everglades

UNCURLED by sun, the ferns' pale tendrils dangle
Upon the steaming waters of the hour.
With withering wings, upon a copper spangle
Between two lily pads that lift no flower,
A butterfly drinks peace, forgetting pollen.
A diamondhead, coiled like the spring of Time,
Slumbers where amber blades of grass have fallen
In torrid lengths above him. Like a rhyme,
Small water-gnats, slow and monotonous,
Carve ripples far too subtle for the eye
To follow. Dark and brooding, ominous
With silence, vultures ride the burning sky
Seeking the feathered victims of the sun,
The sharpened bone of hunger, starkly-white.
A pale marsh-hyacinth breathes aloof, alone,
Stirring the waters with its lavender light.
Beyond the fern-banks, past their stagnant edge,
A crocodile, grown grey with mud, sleeps free,
Nor caring, stretched upon his world's hot ledge,
If it be noon, another century . . .

Silence

MAN's eager mind, his cunning hand,
Have shaped no thing in all the land
That rises as a shadow might,
Assumes a certain form and height,
But in its smallest motion even
Shatters all silence under heaven.
Building a tower that will last
Only until his day is past,
In struggling up or swinging down
Above the gaping of the town,
His derricks and his engines' roar
Will thunder for a mile or more.

From silence man has much to learn:
How frailest lamps that fireflies burn
Flash on and off and off and on
As silently as winds at dawn;
How lonely pines attain the sky
With less than any needle's sigh,
Attaining it, give back again
A forest thick as sudden rain;
Earth turning slowly, dark to light,
As quietly as a feather's flight.

Some day, perhaps, with War laid by,
In brothership, seeing eye to eye,
When armies of the world shall till

The ravished field, the blackened hill,
God will return to earth again,
Peace falling like sunlight over grain,
And calling men from every land,
Divulge the secrets of His hand.

Then shall we hear, with ears attuned,
The cool blue turbines of the wind,
The generators of the sea,
Their foam-white rhythms quietly
Drawing the silver of a tide,
Shaping its pattern far and wide;
Where April suddenly breaks and flows,
The scarlet diesels of the rose.

Guns Along the Maginot

GUNS along the Maginot,
And lilacs come again—
The pale and wind-blown lilacs,
The dark-as-midnight lilacs,
Lilacs drenched with rain.
(What bayonet shall ever pierce
The heart with sharper pain?)

Guns along the Maginot . . .
And youth with eager eyes
Staring in the heart of spring
Laid bare beneath the skies;
A generation marching
With regimented breath,
Youth that knows no enemy
This shining side of death.

Guns along the Maginot,
And lilacs come again—
The white and sun-hot lilacs,
The cool-with-starlight lilacs,
Lilacs bright with rain!
(What bayonet shall ever pierce
The heart with sharper pain?)

Song

I AM free, I am free forever
I tell myself in the night
When the skies are flowering orchards
Fragrant and bright.
But the hands of Time close darkly
About my wrists; they are tight.

I shake them away, and I cry out
To my love who dreams at my side:
We shall flee to a sunlit country
Where neither is Time nor tide.
But his hands at my throat choke back
The very words I have cried!

Temples

CORINTH is torrid dust and crumbling stone,
Pale Samothrace lies yellowing in a field
Grown brown with lizards drowsing in the sun.
The Parthenon gives up a meager yield
Of all the starry marble that it was,
The carven figures that were fire and song;
Salonica is grass and cypresses;
No temple man has raised has towered long.
With whispered words as fragile as the fern
The temple of our love is builded high,
With blood and bone for rafters, dreams that burn,
And proud it presses toward a cloudless sky.
And is it strange we tremble in the night
Remembering the moon on Athens, ghostly-white? . . .

The Awakening

ALONG the road the thorn is half in bud.
Another day of sun, another night
Of early stars hung low above the wood,
And once again the thorn will wear its white.

The brook's swift pattern spring is measured by
Shatters the valley's silences apart.
What touch of hand, what sudden look of eye
Will light the secret flower of the heart?

Night in the Tidal Marshes

BETWEEN the darkening grasses now the sun
Has left the waters red, as if the long
Slow withering hours of day had left undone
Some tall, defiant blade. The crickets' song
In dull staccatos rides the water, spills
In paler sound where yellowing willows lean,
Grows louder now with answering whippoorwills
And herons pausing in the marsh to preen
Their wings of too much silver from the moon.
Marsh grasses, bent, grow cool with stars of dew
Along their lyric length, tremble with tune
Of small late-croaking frogs, stars slipping through.
The waters brighten for this tremulous hour;
Folded by dark, the drowsy lilies waken,
The slow and measured breathing of each flower
More certain than the heart's, with beauty shaken.

The Dunes

CAN they be gone, these sands we trod together,
Gone like the hours and days that lay between
The first warm breath of spring and August weather—
Is there no shell remaining that has known
Your sunlit feet in passing, nor a gull
Returning to these rocks with querulous-eye
Marking our bodies' length stretched beautiful
As burning amber under a burning sky?
The sand-grass rides the wind, yet still I see
No stalk we broke, nor where the stalk has lain,
No fortress that we built a little way
Beyond the dunes so that it might remain.
Time or the tide it was. Whichever one
I cannot say, who walk the beach alone.

Threnody

NEVER again to know the lips of her
Sweet as a berry red with southern sun,
Never, deep in the secret night, her stir
Beside me, petal-like, when stars are done,

Never again to see her eyes hold morning
As violets hold a shining world of dew,
To hear her voice lift with its music burning
In rapturous tides the days' long hours through,

Never again to lay my head's dark length
Hot with the sweat of toil, within her hands,
To feel their coolness giving me new strength,
Silence that reassures and understands—

Never and never again! And you, death, going
Far from my door with her, leaving no address,
Only a darkened sky with no moon showing
Over the deserts of my loneliness . . .

Memory of Morocco

THERE was no shade in all that stretch of land,
In all that burning stretch of land no shade
Save where a vulture circled over the sand
Or camels in a panting cavalcade
Rested where no tree grew, nor twig, nor leaf,
Then with the falling darkness journeyed on,
Followed by dogs that whined their torrid grief,
Sniffing across the wastes for carrion.
So might the heart, beneath the sun of Time,
Lie barren through the years and cry aloud
For the green tree of love to root and climb
Above it, spreading branches like a cloud,
Unheeded, watch with slowly failing breath
Above it there, the cool-winged hawk of death.

Summer Evening

SUMMER again: the calm, the shadowy evening.

 The locusts wake.

Fireflies bloom in the hedge; like lighted lilies

 They lie on the lake.

Young lovers curled in swings on darkened porches

 Whisper their words;

The wistaria breathes through one late-opening blossom.

 Two homing birds

Pause in the pear tree chiding a moon long tardy;

 The wind stirs low.

Time on the staircase nods; it is falling asleep,

 Or nearly so.

The Butterfly

UPON this sunlit summer day
A butterfly came down my way,
And so we went a mile or two
I guess, before each other knew
We were not going anywhere
But only sought a breath of air.
And since a summer day is long
For one to do his right or wrong,
Perhaps we kept each other out
Of mischief we could be about,
For everywhere I looked I saw
This yellow brother, like the law,
Behind my path and now before,
Nor leaving me a yard or more.

Suddenly turning in my track
I gave a sigh and started back,
Passing flowers I hoped that he
Would pause upon for piracy
So I could dart upon my way
And stop wherever I chose to stay
For half an hour, an hour even,
Since man is free as wind from heaven,
But everywhere I looked he was,
A moving fire along the grass.

On reaching home, and safe, tonight,
Having shut him out as I would a light,
I got to thinking, in a way,
Perhaps that it was well today
He followed me. I might have gone
Somewhere I should not go alone,
And but for his inquisitiveness
My night be troubled more than this.

Sparrows Before Dawn

Now toward the shadowy edges of the night,
In cool slow-dripping dew that holds the sound
Of silver music, notes polished and round,
Slipping from leaves in cadences of light,
Sheltered by boughs that hold the darkness still
The small birds stir, a feathered symphony
Bursting their little throats in ecstasy,
Knowing daybreak imminent beyond the hill.
Thus from my pillow, turning, to endure
Once more the sound of dawn before it breaks,
Hearing their chatter, dew-wet leaves that sigh
Against the darkness till the last leaf shakes,
I wish again I could be half as sure
Of dawn within the heart, as birds, the sky.

The Return

UNDER the leaves of the laurel,
Under the flowering lime
When the night was a pattern of stars,
I loved in a wild, sweet clime.
And the breath of the laurel lay heavy
As darkness upon the warm air,
And the lime's white petals fell softly,
Scattered upon us there.
And I said in a sigh or a whisper
Under the young moon's light:
Only the darkness shall leave us,
Darkness forsake us tonight.

Now I wander the paths where I lingered
Many and many a time,
And the darkness returns, and the blossoms
Unfold in the laurel, the lime,
And I call out the names that were music
At doors I remember too well;
They are gone like the last note shaken
Out of the throat of a bell.
So I turn in the shadowy silence,
Taking the road with a sigh,
Forgotten, alone in a strange land,
Under a stranger sky.

The Children

I HEAR the children in the park.
About their games they go,
Their laughter music in the dark
To and fro.

The lamps of evening spill their light
Across the hedge, the grass;
Like sudden flowers of the night
Their shadows bloom and pass.

I laugh with them, I cry their cry,
The children, never lonely—
And watching them, I am not I,
But for an instant only.

The Thaw

Now with the icy grip of winter's hand
Releasing all the waters of the world
Rushing like sudden music over the land,
Beneath the snow in pink precision curled
The pale arbutus and the bloodroot flower,
The tender grass thrust through the waking field,
Is it too much to hope, this tremulous hour,
The rivers of hate within the heart will yield?
Man is no ice-locked thing; his breast was made
For tides of peace and faith and brotherhood,
His pulsing body shapen to be laid
Beside the fount of love in womanhood,
To taste of sunlight and his acre of grain.
Let him not hear these thawing waters in vain.

Sandpipers

THE tide sweeps farther, farther out, as though
The early moon's cold hands
Withdrew it taut an instant, letting it go
Once more upon the sands.

Sandpipers gather now with sea withdrawn.
O small, swift-hopping birds
Searching for shells, sea-weed, a shark's bright bone,
Crying pale salty words,

Why come you here upon the lonely beach?
Does not the great sea take
All life, all beauty within its hungering reach?
What thing would it forsake?

You answer not, O sandpipers dark and wise!
Nor answers the lips of Love
Stalking its beach when love like a great tide dies,
Picking at all that it was fashioned of.

Summer Is Ended

"SUMMER is ended," you said, "Is finished, like a flower—
These oleander flowers that drop away.
The sea-oats crackle under the wind's sharp scythe;
Throw out these shells, we must leave the shore today."

And so we slowly packed the things we wore,
Garments still warm with sunlight, and a red
Wide scarf that held the pattern of a wave.
"Summer is ended; now we must go," you said.

Taking the roadway past the slumbering hammocks
We neared the city. Suddenly my eyes grew dim,
And I could hear you speaking, far and faintly,
Your slow, sad words with foam and sun on them.

This Shining Tide, This Stretch of Sea

OF ALL this shining tide, this stretch of sea
Bringing the sunrise inward to the shore,
This wide, deep-throated music setting free
The silences of night within its roar,
One shell I found upon the beach, one shell;
A bird might drink thereof nor quench his thirst,
So small and round its crinkled cup, too small
To satisfy the bird that found it first.
Of all this sea, I said . . . but what of Time
Whose tides sweep darkness in the heart, and light,
A surge of rapture whose swift breakers climb
Until of their own force they spend their height?
Against the setting sun, whose heart, whose hand
Holds more than one bright shell, a pinch of sand?

Ah Spendthrift Beauty

AH SPENDTHRIFT Beauty, can you never teach
Your sister, Love, the magic of your hand?
Lighting a thousand roses when one would reach
And fire the heart with color, brightening the sand
With seven oceans when a single wave
Pausing half-way toward heaven, breaking then,
Would blind a mortal, send him to his grave
Singing your praises over and over again,—
Cannot you, with your warm and bright persuasion,
Make Love relinquish hours she possesses,
Shower them on all men with no evasion,
The rich, the poor whom only weather blesses,
Succor the starving heart, the sleepless one
With loneliness beside him like a stone?

As Winds in Autumn

As WINDS in autumn shall reveal the nest
Long sheltered by the music of the leaves,
Frail straws and leaves of laurel closely pressed,
Cassina berries bright among the weaves,
So shall your heart, when autumn winds have rolled
Their tides of bronze across the darkening day,
Look to the Tree of Life and there behold
The truth I spoke; and where the branches sway
In cold confusion in the gathering night,
You shall behold upon the topmost bough
This love I bring you like a torch of light,
This love you cast aside and trample now.
How blind the heart to love before the eye!
How clear its signature against the sky!

Snow

You were so young then, far too young to know
The meaning of snow.
Watching it fall, your face at the pane,
Your breath making there a misty stain,
You turned and looked at me,
And suddenly
"Isn't it beautiful falling?" you said.
I smiled, and nodded my head.

Wherever you are, a score of winters have passed.
Springs and summers and autumns lie fast
Under the blanket they spread.
I think of you now, your dear, dark head
Pressed at the pane, your eyes alight,
Laughing to see a world turned white,
Praying the drift at the door overnight
Would imprison us there. Little you guessed
The cries in the dark. You said they were wind,
Shadows were shadows, not old men thinned
To the shape of their hunger, hiding in wait
For a crust of bread, or a south-bound freight.

You were so young, too young to know.
I think of you now, watching the snow . . .

Adventure in Spring

It WAS here, in this wood, by these rocks and these rain-
washed ledges
Cool with the folded fern and the fern unfolding,
By these rocks that are scented with laurel, these rocks that
are holding
The slow procession of moss to their outermost edges.

It was here that her footprint was, in the green of the grass
come back.

These primroses knew her touch like a slow wind going by,
Shaking the dew from their tight-lipped cups, letting them
crack

In bloom full-blown, and astonished, stare at the sky.

It was here, in this wood, that we moved like a spring come
early,

Like a leaf or a twig that the silence commands.

Though still I return, she is gone, she is gone forever; too
clearly

Taking the heart of spring, like a throbbing bird, in her hands.

Deer by Moonlight

I KNOW by the stir of the birch, the quiver of alder,
The deer are there,
Making a sound that is less than the falling of moonlight
Shining and clear.

Their antlers are hidden, are sheltered by patterns of shadows
That no man makes,
Their breathing is soft, as soft as the pouring of silver
When a leaf breaks.

Dark is their dreaming, as dark as the dream of the woodland
Dripping with dew.
I know they are there; I shall see, before dawn takes a thicket,
Stars looking through.

Auf Wiedersehen: Munich

RUNNING beside your train and breathlessly
Waving farewell and throwing a kiss to you,
Watching the lantern fading in the twilight
Till you are lost, and lost the lantern, too,

I turn bewildered, knowing east nor west,
For you are gone, gone from me like the sun
Whirling across the reaches of the earth
Leaving it dark and lonely, I the lonelier one.

The Open Sea

THE open sea spreads far and wide
Beyond the reaches of the tide,
Past the farthest harbor light
Rises, plunges, toward the night.

The wind is up, the mast, the sail,
Ride against its splitting wail,
And suddenly now my eyes grow blind,
The sea ahead, the land behind.

And all I know is what has been,
The port ahead; what rests between
The wave of life, the wave of death,
Lies in the margin of a breath.

June in Walton County

THE dust lies heavy, hot upon the road.
Cape jasmines that the dew washed white as rain
Redden and wither as a darky's load
Of watermelons stirs the dust again.
Dry fields burn gold with fennel; rows of corn
Drop tassels for a wind that will not come;
Sparrows that ravished figs since early morn
Drift now to thickets yellowing with plum.
This is my country: drowsy-eyed my people,
Unhurried as the slow black hands of Time
That move and strike high in the courthouse steeple,
As casual as their lives' monotonous rhyme.
Small wonder that I find beside my gate
At dusk, the four-o'clocks unfolding late.

The Exile

WHEN I was young the beautiful sea was wide,
Stretching beyond the farthest dream of space;
Over my body I felt the curving tide,
All of its shining magic in my face.
Along the sands I gathered patterned shells,
Held them against my ear and suddenly there
I heard a music like the toss of bells
In ports where moonlight drifted cold and clear.
And turtle eggs I found, a heron's feather
Still warm with eager flight into the sun,
And sea anemones when gull-grey weather
Blew shoreward from the wind's dark clarion.
And I remember stumbling on a light
That was a starfish burning in the night.

All these were mine, all these were mine to keep—
Too much of splendor for a small boy's hands,
And so beside me in my bed asleep
They rested—all my treasures from the sands.
O beautiful sea long alien to my heart,
Break over the barren shoreline of my days,
Hear one who loves you wake at night and start,
Who, over the dying embers, speaks your praise.
Sweep inward sea, your long bright acres breaking!
O once again to hear your music swell,
To find, past nightfall, peace and quiet waking,
Once more within my hands, a singing shell!
O beautiful sea, O sea too long withdrawn,
Break over my heart like tides of fire at dawn!

The Lizard

OF ALL the cities I have come upon,
London or Paris, Naples or Bombay,
None seems to me so dazzling as the one
My garden lizard treads with feet of clay.
Gold boulevards are his where daffodils
Lean yellow in the sunlight, purple lanes
Where April lights the hyacinths and squills,
And silver highways made by sudden rains.
But where the tulips' canopies unfold
In burning patterns wide and tremulous,
He sleeps, with beauty in his heart grown old,
Coiled under a shining leaf, oblivious
To towers the larkspur lifts, the shade it throws,
The crimson architecture of the rose.

I Know a Country

I KNOW a country that no sea has bound.
Upon no old and charted map it lies
Due east or west. Beyond all sight and sound
Of mariners and ships and searching eyes
Of northern stars it stretches, bright with sun,
Lost in an archipelago of peace
Where no man's footprint rests, no tide is run
In driven patterns crying for release.
There spring lies cool and green on bough and leaf,
Summer and autumn are seasons never known,
No boat puts into shore, nor Time, the thief;
No circling gulls cry out their monotone.
O keep forever, heart,—let none invade
This wild sweet country that our love has made!

Fishermen Off Palermo

LIKE a blue stretch of thought the sea lies calm,
Bright in the noonday sun. The boats drift out
Like music from the lime tree and the palm
Scenting the harbor waters. Now a shout
Shatters the silence and the nets go down
Burning like molten gold into the sea;
Swiftly as flying fish they leap and drown,
Sucked under the slow tides breaking quietly.
The old men drowse and nod the hours away;
Their sons stretch on the deck and think and stare
Into the lighted sky. With dying day
They draw the nets and, singing high and clear,
Turn shoreward, having promises to keep,
The old men only rendezvous with sleep.

Congo Night

THE camps flare through the dusk. The bamboo glows
With yellow leaves, and scarlet, where the fire
Brightens the drowsy air. In measured rows
The dancers circle, chanting. Higher, higher,
Their voices rise, the tom-toms beat, the horn
Of ivory bellows; round and round again
The naked bodies sway, the drums' forlorn
Staccato pulsing through the painted men.
An arrow's flight away the topaz eyes
Of leopards smolder, contemplate; in dark
Cool depths of fern the slumbering cobra lies;
Hyenas snap at fireflies' teasing spark.
Slow silence breathes upon the listening night;
Like orchids in the trees the hot stars light.

Mountain Snowfall

So COLD the night, the wind paused, rubbing his hands,
Blowing his breath into their frozen cup.
We followed his path as he parted the snow-laden hemlocks
Swinging them down, and then up.

There was no moon nor a star through the darkness,
Only the lanterns of our hearts unafraid,
Keeping us warm as we stumbled down toward the village,
Casting their light ahead.

The Daisy

THE daisy, being what it is,
Affords a lesson none can miss:

Starkly simple, simply white,
A naked heart of yellow light

Beside a windswept country lane,
Its head held high in sun or rain,

As bright in April as July,
Oblivious to passersby,

Deaf alike to scorn or praise,
Innocence within its gaze.

Consider how its petals are
Star-shaped, and yet it is no star,

Though well it might bear such pretense,
Or lift in cool indifference

Above each common bloom that blows,
Nod with the aster or the rose.

It draws its wisdom from deep wells:
To be itself and nothing else.

The White Cathedral

DEEP in the winter woods I went
Alone, and quite alone.
Above me boughs of cedar bent,
Carved and quiet as stone.

There was no bird in all that wood,
No grey surprise of hare,—
And I could see from where I stood
No footprint there.

Where morning went I never knew,
And I could never tell
Which was the path where laurel grew,
Or birch, or winterbell.

But pausing there, a man half-blind,
How good it was to know
Wherever I looked that I would find
Contentment deep as snow,

And hear no word and see no thing
In all that world of white
To question this pale leveling,
This shining height.

Three Swans

Cool as a wind at break of day,
Heads lifted like a flower
Not opened, but about to open
In the sun's bright hour,

They drift: three swans. So quietly
Each following each they go,
No ripple widens in the wake
Of feathers pale as snow.

And on the surface of the lake
When they have gained at last
The farther shore, no feather lies
To testify they passed.

O silence of unuttered words!
O lake where quiet is!
What troubled heart shall ever know
Such peace as this?

Swamp Interlude

THE swamp lay hot with sun. Old twisted trees
Hung pale with moss that withered when the red
Swift wings of fiery birds swept overhead
Screaming away the swamp's slow dream of peace.
Marsh hyacinths and lilies' yellow bells
Unrung for many a moon drowsed through the day,
And where the myrtles thickened into grey
A heron stalked for prideful intervals.
Suddenly the lilies shook. Where dusk had fallen
A serpent rose, uncoiled, and, heavy as stone,
Plunged darkly, leaving the dusk-light gold with pollen.
The serpent, Time, I thought, that slumbers here
As in the heart, the mind, and then is gone,
Leaving us, in its wake, to wonder where.

Tyrol Morning

THE morning broke in brightening tides of peace.
Beneath us there, beyond the precipice,
Still half-asleep, a wild-flowered valley lay.
A sheep-bell tinkled, then another one,
And still another far, far off, as though
The wind had taken anemones by surprise,
Shaking their bells from silence into sound.

Slowly the mountains stirred. A thread of smoke
Drifted from houses where night had held the latch.
A yoke of oxen wearily climbed the steep,
Their dark hooves glittering with the dew they tread;
Approaching us, their eyes were four small suns
Burning their slow way up the mountain pass.

We picked our way into the valley below,
Pausing at intervals in the sharp descent,
Hearing the little grasses swinging back,
Making a cool green sound against the rocks,
Saying no word of all the words we knew,
Knowing that peace had left our hearts forever.

But Not for Summer Passed

Now autumn's hoary breath hangs on the world.
The fields where summer's golden body slept
Like some young vagabond, turn brown, are curled
With frosty asters, sumac scarlet-tipped.
The fingering wind plucks clean the brilliant bough;
Turned southward now in patterns swift and sure,
Birds ride the greying stretches of the sky;
Above the dusk Arcturus rises clear.
But not for summer passed, the heart will weep
Across the bitter day, but for its sons
Struck down at youth's full-shining tide, who sleep
Beneath the mileless meadows of the guns,
Whose names are vanquished names, or conquerors',
For whom no wild birds cry, and no leaf stirs.

Now Since the Blue Pacific

Now since the blue Pacific stretches west,
The grey Atlantic thunders toward the east,
And I am twenty-one and more, and blest
With silver coins of Time to spend, I feast
My eyes upon the maps of all the world:
Where shall I venture when the dawn is red?
To some far jungle where green leaves are curled
By steaming suns till nights bring stars and shade?
To high sierras like a dream of peace
Against a sky so still that no cloud moves,
To lakes that hold a moon without release,
Where nightingales wake dead men and their loves?
I ponder this, yet knowing well and clear
A single word might hold me captive here.

Song at the Marshes' Edge

WHEN the last scythe of darkness bends the grasses
And the slow moon has fled beyond the night,
And the young wind of morning pauses and passes,
Stirring wild lilies cupped with sudden light,

I tread the long lost summers of my mind,
Remember how a lad would take the road
Beside the sunlit marshes, pause to find
A heron's eggs, and weigh the fragile load

Within his hands bronzed by a dozen summers,
Ponder on life-to-be and outspread wings,
Then, wading deeply where the berry glimmers
Like rubies over the water where it swings,

Seek other nests and learn the ways of birds,
Or wait for hours till a whippoorwill
Breaks the long silence with his grieving words
No man has understood, or ever will;

And through the long days with his eager eyes
Like cornflowers or the sky, whichever bluer,
He looked on life, the dream that never dies,
Counted at night a thousand stars, no fewer.

Now still the marsh grows yellow with the morning,
The heron dips into the lighted sky,
His throat and wings with sunrise suddenly burning,
But he is gone, the lad that once was I—

And lonely is my heart, for all that passes
Is fire to keep an old man's heart alight
When the last scythe of darkness bends the grasses,
And the slow moon has fled beyond the night.

Snow-Silence

BEFORE me and behind me stretched the day,
To east and west a meadowland of grey.

The wind blew sharp and scratched among the boughs;
Slow smoke breathed from the chimney of each house.

A bird flew past me with no greeting said;
The road beneath my feet grew hard as lead,

And from the gulleys there I saw a light
As eyes of rabbits stared into the night,

Sheltered beneath a frozen vine, their fur
So soft no blade of grass made any stir.

I passed a farmer turning in his lane;
He looked my way but once and not again,

Then hurried on, and with no word for me,
Nor pondered on whose neighbor I might be.

And thus I learned from man and bird a-wing,
Snow-silence is a sort of holy thing.

Yuccas: Near Taos

THERE was no sound in all that gathering darkness.
The road before me like a serpent lay
Drowsily coiling into the purple mountains
Still warm and sweet with memory of day.

The burden that I bore grew somehow lighter
As mile on mile I trod the rhythmic road,
Breathing the shadowy silence, loitering
At intervals, unmindful of my load.

And when I reached the door of one who waited,
How could her heart be fretful with a lover
Who paused to watch the yuccas fill with moonlight,
To hear the music when their bells ran over?

The Stranger

WHO went before me in this snow
I cannot say; I do not know.
But pondering him, one thing is clear:
With flakes the largest of the year,
A steady fall since early night,
He hasn't turned to left nor right.
You'd think he'd take a natural pride
To stop and watch his countryside
Grow whiter than its been before
In eighteen winters or a score,
Or prop a paling underneath
This pear tree cracking to its death.

I wonder whose these steps might be?
Each field I pass is white and free
Of tracks from any house or barn.
I think that I will take a turn
Into the village. There's a slim
Cold chance that if I follow him,
The distance being but a mile,
I'll come upon him in a while
Among the villagers and carts.
He'll be a stranger in these parts.

To a Robin in Late Autumn

O FOOLISH bird upon a burning bough
Did you not see the summer swiftly go,
Her blossoms turned beneath the frost's white plow,
Her green leaves redden like a lantern's glow?
How can you linger here with one lone note
Calling and calling summer back again?
Not all the music of your fiery throat
Can resurrect one bloom. You sing in vain.
And yet, O foolish bird, I am not one
To speed your flight across the winter sky—
I who have lingered above the skeleton
Of Love, breathed on its bones, my heart, my eye
Well knowing it is dust for many a year.
Sing on, sing on, into the frosty air!

Beneath This Cliff, O Love

BENEATH this cliff, O love, the Adriatic
Measures its music on a stretch of sand.
The sharpened rocks are warm with fire of flowers
Whose seed was scattered by the wind's blue hand.

The clouds above us, pale as your young breasts,
Drift southward where the sea and sky are one.
Far out, a lonely fisherman rides the tide,
Dragging his slow net burning with the sun.

The hands of Time are folded; they are tired
Of crumbling empires, battles, blood and death.
This is our sudden world, O love! It cries
Our name with every darkening flower's breath!

Beneath us here, the Adriatic; far
Above the almond boughs, the first slow star . . .

In Heidelberg, in Heidelberg

IN HEIDELBERG, in Heidelberg,
When the moon was high,
I saw three centuries of lads
Marching by.

Arm in arm, and gay they were,
Laughing down the street,
And softer than the moonlight fell
The music of their feet.

Dreams had fired their eyes again,
Battles were forgot,
Kingdoms come and kingdoms gone,
And loves, as like as not.

But when I turned to hail them
Their silence drowned my cry—
Three centuries of merry lads
Under a moon-white sky.

Now the Last Oleander

Now the last oleander drops away,
The hot red velvet blossom, and the white,
That were a fire by noon, a star by night,
And summer goes as swiftly as the day.

O love against my heart in this sad hour
Of summer's going, let us mark each shell
We found: the gold one patterned like a bell,
The white one crinkled like a poppy flower.

And if the summer comes to me no more,
And your bright face is but a memory,
Forever I shall hear the passionate sea,
Your laughter like blue wind along the shore.

The Venetian Glass-Blowers

WITH cool precision and a brain that fires
The eye with color as the sun, the sky,
Bending above their smoldering amber pyres,
From heat and steel and breath soft as a sigh
They wring transparency of seas that run
In emerald music over shining sands,
The warm gold glitter of a Grecian moon,
The quiet rhythm of remembered hands.
No star, no planet is forsaken: here
The pale blue flash of Mars, Arcturus red
Over the autumn evening; cold and clear
The yellow light of Venus, faceted.
O that my hands could shape from Time one hour
Flashing with fire that is their crystal power!

Song

I HAVE seen a thousand
Orchids in a jungle,
Pale and purple orchids,
Orchids red as sun,
Hanging in the hot trees
Dreaming out the hours.
I have stared upon them,
Plucked not one.

I have wandered darkly
When the moon was slow
Where a sea of roses
Opened on the air—
Yellow roses, white roses
Cool as starlight,
Breathed of them deeply,
Left them nodding there.

I have folded closely
In a little volume
Violets you brought me
With eyes as dark as sleep,
And that is why no flower
In the fairest gardens
Is ever half so lovely
As the blooms I keep.

Words for a Rising Moon

I CANNOT say what lovers side by side
Slumber beneath hot stars in Singapore;
With velvet-scented fingers to explore
What darkened Arab turns him to his bride
In silken tents spread on the desert's floor;
Or in their year of ice, what Vikings' fire
Burns through the night in torrents of desire.

But Love, beside me under this same moon,
We are as one, all lovers in the night;
Whether we speak our words by jungle light,
By flashing scimitars or eerie tune
Of ivory horn, when moons hang yellow and bright,
We turn, and each to each, Nome to Cape Town—
In love's fierce tide we drift, and drifting, drown.

The Hills of Greece

BELOVÉD, the hills of Greece are warm with flowers
And blue winds stumble on them as they pass,
And still along the Nile through torrid hours
White ibis fly like shadows in a glass.
And on a cliff beneath Sicilian skies
A flock of sheep climb slowly like a thing
Attuned to music, while the almond cries
From twisted branches the pale name of spring.
These things I know, and love, for I am one
Who long has trod the earth and found it sweet,
From lowliest grasses withering in the sun
To clouds like ships above the isle of Crete;
And yet, how strangely at the close of day
Before your eyes they slowly drift away!

Brief Farewell

STRANGE how we met, and laughed, and said small words
Deep in the busy street, then journeyed on,
A farewell casual as the flight of birds
From spring-white boughs, or darkness from the dawn.
There was so much to say above the crowd,
So much for eye to eye, for hand to hand
To tell by look, or touch, and yet we stood
Speechless as aliens in an alien land.
I might have told you how the long days reach
Like tideless seas across the heart and mind,
How letters once you wrote lie each to each,
Read and reread when twilight draws the blind;
Yet in a moment's space you waved good-bye,
Lost in a city not needing you as I.

Winter Orchard

CLOSE the door and latch it tight,
Draw the blind, shut out the night.
Snow, since noon, along the boughs
Whitens the world about my house.
Silent orchards, long asleep,
Bow and break with blossoms deep,
Curve and let their petals go
Only to bloom again with snow.
Latch the door and draw the blind,
Lest the heart too clearly find
A leaf that's false, a bloom that lies,
And look on spring with doubtful eyes.

O Bird Turned Southward

O BIRD turned southward in the sharpened weather,
Fleeing the slow bronze sky,
Flying before your covey, now flying together
Patterned and beautiful and high,

My heart cries out to you—it speeds you on!
In your deep-scented night
Recall a fool beside Love's cold hearthstone,
Too weary, too broken for flight!

For More Than Beauty

FOR more than beauty have I need:
The stirring earth, the bursting seed
That lifts slow fire into the air,
Perfume like incense rising clear
Where laurel takes a mountainside,
The thunder of a moon-washed tide
Across the darkness of a reef—
These shall not appease my grief.

Beauty can fill the sky with light,
But not the empty heart when night
Has strung a million stars above.
She cannot fuel the lamp of love
Nor set it bright upon the sill;
She never has; she never will.
And cold she lies, as cold as stone,
Against his heart who sleeps alone.

The Weather

"How is the weather out?" you ask, on rising,
Clapping your hands together before the fire.
I scan the dark barometer, surprising
You with the low degree. "It will work higher,"
You say, "as morning wears." And so it will.
Then, lost in April's quiet you will come
Up from the garden with a daffodil,
Or later on, the pale delphinium
Will fill your hat, larkspur, and baby's-breath,
And you will frown and ask me the degree,
And beg a glass of water before your death
From summer's gold and blue humidity.
But never have you asked, in any year,
If weather of the heart be dark or clear.

In Time of Spring

Now from the waking womb of earth
The blossoms winter sired
Ripen with color warm as mirth,
And thickets darkly-briared
Make their white promises again
Of berry and of plum.
The heron cries as sharp as pain
His wild delirium.

In its accustomed place the sun
Looks down, the winds go by
Scented with blossoms as they run,
And bluer to the eye,
But there is one who will not see
These blooms, nor hear these wings,
And I shall walk alone and be
With her, in other springs.

Sonnet to the Younger Generation

THOUGH you will not believe, there was a time
When summer was a breath across the heart
Of wine-red clover and deep-scented thyme,
A field where lovers lay and tore apart
A flower's petals, shaped their years to be,
Stared into stars until the skies were one;
When men turned home with dusk and slumbered free,
Dreams burning with the promise of a sun.
You will not find it now: this is a world
Of knives thrust deep in every brother's back,
Of flaming cities, madness kindled, hurled
At sea and jungle with each new attack.
It was not always so, earth battle-scarred.
Peace once has walked her ways. Believe my word.

THE AUTHOR

A native of the state of Georgia, Daniel Whitehead Hicky was educated in private schools at Memphis, Tennessee, and Charlotte, North Carolina, and has spent a great deal of time in foreign travel. Europe, Egypt, the Holy Land, Africa, South America, the West Indies—he has visited them all and all have given him material for his verse. Since 1934, when he left the cotton business to devote his time to writing, he has lectured before university and club groups throughout the country. His poetry has appeared in the leading periodicals and been collected in four volumes: *Bright Harbor*, *Thirteen Sonnets of Georgia*, *Call Back the Spring*, and *Wild Heron*. In 1931 he won first prize of the Poetry Society of America.

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